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Commissioner Harris enlists her "front line soldiers" to help save children

Remarks by Commissioner Gwendolyn L. Harris for the Annual Meeting of the New Jersey Chapter,
National Association of Social Workers (NASW) -- April 28, 2003. [Dawn Apgar, President - NJ Chapter,
NASW]

ATLANTIC CITY, NEW JERSEY -- Proud to count herself among their ranks and energized by their motivation,
former social worker and now Department of Human Services (DHS) Commissioner Gwendolyn L. Harris addressed the
state's social workers during today's convention lunch at Bally's Park Place Hotel and Casino, today to enlist their help in
saving children.

"Social workers are the front line soldiers of helping professionals trying to do battle with society's ills. As social
workers, we are committed to working to make a better life for individuals and families, and especially for those in our
society who are the neediest, the most vulnerable, the most defenseless."

"I would hold out to you today that the most pressing battle we face today involves the American family. Indeed, I
believe we are in crisis."

Harris then called on the social work community to come together to help address this crisis in some very specific, and
some very new ways.

She described how, when a child is being abused or neglected and when all else fails, New Jersey's Division of Youth
and Family Services (DYFS) - as the agency charged with protecting children - is supposed to step in and make sure that
child is protected. That does not always work, as evidenced by the past few months' stories in the state's newspapers
that have revealed problems in New Jersey's child protection system.

While recapping the tragic death of Faheem Williams in Newark, and his starving and abused brothers, she reiterated the
tragic lapses in the DYFS system regarding abuse investigations and follow up. And she expanded on the subject of
foster children, pointing out the severe shortage of foster homes and inadequate quality of too many of them.

"From all these stories, one thing is clear. New Jersey's child protection system is in trouble. The protection that DYFS
is supposed to provide for children is not working. Children are dying while they are in our care," she stated.

"The permanency that DYFS is supposed to afford children when they are removed from their homes is elusive. Children
are dying in New Jersey because DYFS cannot protect them. But as crucial as it is for us to fix the situation at DYFS –
and I assure you, we are taking steps to fix DYFS – the crisis about which I want to talk with you today affects our child
protection system in the broadest sense. It is a crisis that is rooted in the way our society – too often – chooses to ignore
its children and to compartmentalize its efforts to deal with them.

"The crisis is rooted in the "busy-ness" of our personal and our professional lives. The crisis is rooted in a lack of
awareness, and knowledge, about how to recognize the signs of child abuse and an understanding of how to take steps to
help rectify it. The crisis is growing because we turn our heads and say 'I have my job to do'."

Empathizing with her fellow social workers, Harris acknowledged that they had probably all "been there, and felt that."
She reiterated their feelings that "We can't save the world. . . it's just too much. . . let someone else do it. I have my job
to do."

Harris then launched into the numbers of child deaths in the past five years in New Jersey, with a tough breakdown of
percentages showing what went wrong and where.

According to numbers from the Child Fatality and Near Fatality Review Board, in the past five years in New Jersey,
between 1998 and 2002, the state knows of 123 children who died of abuse or neglect in New Jersey… in all parts of
this state, in cities, suburbs and small towns.

Harris pointed out that not only were these children "robbed of their hopes, their dreams and their very lives," but also
that "we as a society were robbed of their potential to do good, to contribute, to create, to dream, to affect the future."

"These children were home alone; beaten; bruised; neglected; born to parents on drugs; born to parents who couldn't
parent; born to parents who had given up on themselves and therefore had nothing left to give to their children."

She admitted that DYFS should have saved those children: that in some cases DYFS could have and should have been
able to save those children, because DYFS had open cases on almost 40 percent – or 48 of those children and their
families. And if there were any children that DYFS could have helped, it could be argued that it would have been those
children.

But another 27 percent – or 33 of those 123 children -- belonged to families that had been known to DYFS at one time,
but their cases had been closed for what were considered appropriate reasons, consistent with agency policy. She noted
that perhaps DYFS could have and should have been able to predict that there were problems in those families. And
perhaps not.

"Some of those children were born to mothers whose older children had been removed from the home. But DYFS never
learned that the mother was pregnant again. By the time DYFS found out, a child was dead, perhaps from abuse,
perhaps from the effects of drugs used by the mother during the pregnancy."

Harris then explained that more than one-third – or 42 -- of those 123 children were unknown to DYFS altogether.
Clearly, those 42 children belonged to troubled families; but there had been no report, no allegation of abuse or neglect,
or even a phone call to say "I think something might be wrong" that would have put those families on the DYFS radar
screen.

DYFS – for all its much-publicized problems – never got the opportunity to help those children. "To put it another way,
more than a third of those 123 children were not only at risk, but also may have been totally on their own," said Harris.

"Or were they?" she asked. Harris continued, "those children and their families must have been known to someone. To the county welfare agency, to a WIC program, a pediatrician, a community health clinic, their neighbors, the schools, a church. . . somebody. Someone who could have said – 'I think there is a problem here.' And raised a red flag of alarm. DYFS cannot do this job alone. Indeed, no one person or agency can do this job alone," Harris stated.

She reiterated that social workers --trained to work with and to help the neediest and most vulnerable people in society -- have a special role to play in helping to mount the campaign or movement for children's safety that Harris will soon launch.

Harris said "we will need to make some fundamental changes in the way we think about and address the needs of children. We will need to think about what we are seeing—the pregnant mother who is doing drugs, the too-thin child who might be malnourished, the parent who simply seems to lack any type of parenting know-how – and then we will need to find a way to do something about it. To intervene."

"When I speak about a movement for children, I am talking about a new paradigm for addressing the problems of the American family. I am speaking about a child protection system that is bigger than DYFS. It includes governmental and non-governmental, formal and informal systems—and the people in them—that touch the lives of children and shape the destiny of troubled families. Our community system includes the neighbors, the mail carrier, the Sunday school teacher, the owner of the corner store and the crossing guard. These people interact with children and their families often in an informal, but frequent, way. They need to be enlisted, and to become partners in our efforts to launch a movement for children."

"We also need to enlist all those governmental agencies that interact with families in crisis. Law enforcement and the courts—medical personnel and hospitals—county welfare agencies and WIC—the food pantry and the schools. All of us must find a way to move to a higher level of caring for our children."

"We must begin with the premise that a child's safety and well-being depends on a strong family, and strong families

depend on connections with a broad range of people, organizations and community institutions. No single factor is responsible for child abuse and neglect, and therefore no one public agency alone can safeguard children. As social workers, we fit into this movement for children because of who we are and what we do. We are trained to help and assist the neediest, the most vulnerable, the families and children at risk."

"It seems like a very big job, to enlist the community and agencies and other state departments that serve families in a movement for children. It is. Some people will have to be prodded and pulled and pushed into helping to create a new paradigm for the way in which we care for our children. But the job is not so big if we consider some other things about those 123 child deaths that I referred to a few moments ago. When we hear the words "abuse and neglect," it often calls to mind the image of a child who is beaten or physically deliberately abused in some other way. But those of you who work in agencies that serve families and children know that the picture is much more complex. Consider this.

Fifty-seven percent – or 70 -- of the children who died were under the age of one-year-old—too young to have gained much visibility or attention outside the home.

Almost 15 percent – or 18 of the children -- were younger than one month old.

Twelve of those 123 children (9.8 percent) died because someone –a parent or a caregiver – as filled with frustration as they were lacking in understanding and parenting skills –literally shook them to death. "Shaken baby syndrome," we call it. Maybe these were people who simply didn't know how to quiet a baby.

Twenty-eight of the children, or 23 percent, died because an accident occurred when someone wasn't watching them as well as they should.

Three children died because they were left unattended in a bathtub and drowned.

"Think what a difference it could have made if the parent, or the caregiver, had understood something so basic as never to leave a baby or a toddler in a bathtub unsupervised."

Five children (4 percent) drowned in a swimming pool.

Five children (4 percent) died in fires.

Sixteen children (13.1 percent) died because their mothers used drugs while she was pregnant.

Two children died as a result of "unsafe sleep," which we use to mean that a parent rolled over on a baby while in bed.

"Regardless of how they died, we now know, for a fact, that they were all children at risk. And we also know that DYFS simply does not know about all children at risk. So the overarching questions then becomes, what can we as a society do about those children, to keep them safe, to keep them alive? And more specifically, as it affects each and every one of us who are together in this room, what can we, as social workers, do for our children? Those of us who work in hospitals, in schools, in maternal health programs, in county welfare agencies? What can we do?"

"How can we get beyond the "I'm just doing my job" syndrome, and begin to look at families more holistically? How can we make a difference in this movement for children? If this movement for children is going to take hold, I believe that it will be because we, as social workers, have helped to make it happen."

Harris then stressed that "We should begin by considering hard questions and talking about how to approach serious problems in new ways."

She then discussed a common example: If the child protection agency is involved with a family because of abuse or neglect and severe abuse is substantiated, and the parents cannot be rehabilitated, DYFS removes the child, seeks to terminate parental rights and has the child adopted. DYFS then closes the case with the parents.

"The parents have another child," explained Harris. "Should it be public policy to alert all hospitals and birthing places to notify the child protection agency, because this newborn is at risk? As social workers, these are the types of hard questions I believe we should be asking ourselves and talking about."

She then cited another example:

? "What about the case of the teenage girl – unknown to DYFS -- who says she did not know that she was pregnant until

she went to the bathroom and delivered a baby? How do we intervene and save that child before it dies, alone and neglected in the trash bin in the bathroom?"

Believing that the real, long-term way to solve this crisis is not just to "catch" these cases, Harris implored the social workers to help find new ways to educate and prevent… to stop the ignorance that creates adults who don't know any other way to parent than to abuse or neglect their own children. Or leave them unattended in a bathtub. Or place them in bed with them at night so that they are in danger of rolling over on them while they sleep.

Besides existing parenting programs, the Commissioner pointed out the example of a family that passes through the clinic, or the child care center, or who goes to church or to the corner grocery store, but who has not risen to the level of concern that would prompt a call to DYFS and a referral to a parenting program, but that may be on the brink of child abuse out of frustration or out of lack of basic child rearing skills.

"How do we teach parents who to leave their child with if they have to run an errand? Some parents really, truly, do not understand that a child cannot be left with just anyone," asked Harris, who then pointed out that eighteen children (14.8 percent) of the 123 children who died were physically abused by a caregiver other than their mother or their father.

"The question we have to ask ourselves is how can we, as social workers, become more aware, more cognizant of these issues, and then how can we, as social workers, take that knowledge and find a way to make a difference? How do we push the edge of the envelope so that we can really stop child abuse and neglect, and help put a child on a course to a stable, healthy adulthood?"

"I believe that regardless of where we work, as social workers, we must all understand the factors – such as substance abuse and domestic violence—that contribute to child maltreatment, as well as child protection. These issues are all too common to all types of families that have problems. And they are subjects that, as a society, we have never grappled with very well."

"But those of us who belong to the helping professions should have, as a matter of course, more than a passing

knowledge of the dynamics of these critical issues. Yet the dynamics of substance abuse or domestic violence are not generally required in the core content curricula that a student must master in order to become a clinical social worker or a psychologist. Nor is a deep understanding of these issues required by state licensing authorities. I believe that we must change that, and change the way in which we are prepared to become social workers, so that no matter where we work, or how we interact with families, we will be able to recognize and understand certain dynamics and issues that will raise that red flag of alarm that can make the difference whether a child lives or dies," charged Harris.

"Because children are our future. Our only future. And as social workers, we must begin to look at children and their families holistically, and recognize that we –more than many others who will come in contact with that family -- have it within our power to literally save a child's life. DYFS cannot do it alone."

"And we cannot wait until DYFS is called in on the case. Because by then, it may be too late." The Commissioner then quoted a Bible verse from the book of Matthew, in which Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me: and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad."

"In a movement for children, I believe that all communities that interact with families and children must come together on their behalf, and that there is no community more important in this regard than the community of social workers. And those of us who do not take part in this effort, are really scattering our energies abroad. Our social work community needs to step up and be counted in this effort to save children. We need to gather our efforts together on behalf of our children."

Commissioner Harris closed with the fact that already, in the first four months of 2003, 11 children have died of abuse or neglect in New Jersey, and that there is much work to do. She shared an old African proverb that speaks to the heart of the problem.

"The ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people."

"I challenge you, as I have challenged others who I believe must enlist in this movement for children, to think about what

this proverb says for our state, New Jersey: 'The ruin of a nation begins in the homes of its people.' The more I think about this proverb, the clearer it becomes to me. The ruin of a nation. . .the demise of a people. . .begins at home. I challenge you to think about what this means for those of us who are social workers.

"We need to value our children. We need to protect our children. We need to put our children first because they are the future of our state, our society, our nation. They are us. We are tragically failing some of our children and this must change. As social workers, we have a special place in the community of people who love children. We are committed to improving lives. And, we are trained to do it."

"Through the many settings in which we work—in government, in agencies, in schools, in hospitals, in welfare offices and child care centers and maternal health programs – we are on the front lines. We can't just save our own child; we have to save the child down the hall, in the neighborhood, across town and on the other side of the state because all their worlds are inextricably intertwined. And we may be their last or only hope," said Commissioner Harris in closing.

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